

WRC - Radio and
the NBC Network

March 7, 1962
4:05 P.M.

Emphasis

Washington, D. C.

A WELL KEPT SECRET

PETER HACKES: "This is Peter Hacks, Emphasis, the Pentagon. If it's worth being a secret, it's worth keeping a secret. Some final notes on the U-2 affair...

"At this point only a few details remain secret in the daring U.S. spy operation, which for nearly four years, until May Day, 1960, gave us a phenomenal look inside Russia--the flights of the U-2 planes. But there was a time, of course, when the whole matter was classified 'Top Secret.' And to a reporter, whose daily business requires him to be a professional snooper, secrets of this nature must remain secret.

"Back in the Fall of 1957, this reporter began checking out a routing story. It had to do with an Air Force utility plane designated U-3. I found it was a Cessna 3--10, twin engine, light plane which carried five passengers. In the course of work on this story I became interested in the U designator for utility planes. The U-1 I found was a Canadian plane, the rugged Norseman, a single engine, six passenger plane which carried 2,000 pounds of cargo. And U-4 I learned was a designator for the Aero-Commander, the twin engine plane which President Eisenhower used in flying back and forth to Gettysburg on weekends. But my digging into the background of the U-2 led up a blind alley. I found it was a high altitude research plane built by Lockheed, that it was doing some weather research, and that was all.

"As a conscientious reporter, I dug more deeply, to the point where an Air Force source, afraid I would go too far, told me the full story. And thereby, incidentally, ended any hope I might have had of using the U-2 story. I was told the mission of the U-2 planes, their altitude and speed, their method of operation, who was flying them, how many we were using, what kinds of information they were picking up over Russia, and the fact that the space agency, N.A.S.A. was the cover--that the pilots were to say they were with NASA weather researchers. I was told further that if ever a shred of the story appeared, traceable to me, there would be a strong denial, and that my welcome as a reporter in the Pentagon might come to an abrupt end.

"Some time later I found from my same source that another reporter an A.P. man had also stumbled onto the U-2 story. Remember, this was three years before the story broke. A guarded check with him confirmed his knowledge, and we both decided then to destroy our notes.

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Over the next three years we learned that as many as six or seven other reporters had stumbled onto the same story. From time to time, other people guessed at parts of the story, and a few articles even appeared here and there, none of them fully accurate. Then came May Day Sunday, of 1960. At the time I was compiling a Monitor newscast. A small news-wire item struck my eye, a NASA high altitude weather research plane was down, having left a base in Turkey.

"Immediately I called the NASA press chief, he checked the story and confirmed it. He said that was all he knew. We found out later that he was telling the truth, that even he was never told the U-2 story in advance. Slowly thereafter, of course, one of the best kept adventures in modern espionage was over, and the U-2 secret was out. Peter Hackes, NBC News, Washington."

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